

UMass/Boston
Colleges of Liberal Arts, Science and Math, and Nursing and Health Sciences
Writing Proficiency Evaluation

Portfolio Reading Set: Rethinking Wilderness

Due: Friday October 22, 2010, by 4:00 p.m. CC 1/1100

Question:

As the title of his essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," tells us, William Cronon argues that there is a problem with how we understand "wilderness." Both Michael Lewis and David Kidner argue that Cronon's argument is important because it has influenced the debate about protecting the environment. However, Lewis and Kidner seem to disagree about whether Cronon's argument helps or hurts the effort to protect the environment.

On one hand, Lewis thinks that "Cronon speculated this wilderness idea actually worked against the emergence of and environmental movement that could make industrial societies livable. [... In his view] wilderness preservation is not a reaction against industrialization, but actually enables the process. Wilderness is the cultural sleight of hand that makes our (often grotesque) contemporary development and exploitation mentally acceptable" (4). And on the other hand, Kidner thinks that Cronon's argument damages the environment movement because he does not think that wilderness is "a primitive sanctuary where the last remnants of an, untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature, can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization" (17).

Your essay should briefly summarize Cronon's argument about the "trouble with wilderness," and then take a position on whether or not Cronon's argument defends the environment or if it works against the cause of protecting the environment.

Readings:

1. Lewis, Michael. "American Wilderness: An Introduction." Ed. Michael Lewis. *American Wilderness: A New History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007. 3-7.
2. Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." Ed. William Cronon. *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York: Norton, 1995. 69-75.
3. Kidner, David W. "Fabricating Nature: A Critique of the Social Construction of Nature." *Environmental Ethics* 22 (2000): 339-345.

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Notes: Your portfolio must contain an essay **that is at least five full pages** (double spaced in 10 or 12 point type) that answers the question above, 15 pages of supporting papers- each one should be attached to a completed Certification Form- and a completed Portfolio Submission form. If you are currently a **first** semester transfer student, you can submit 10 pages of supporting papers, **but you must indicate when you transferred to UMB** on your Portfolio submission form. You must place all of the required items in an envelope that has your name and UMS number on it, and submit it to the **Writing Proficiency Office (CC-1/1100) by 4:00 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 22, 2010.**

- ***American Wilderness: An Introduction, by Michael Lewis***

[Michael Lewis is an Associate Professor of History at Salisbury University and the editor of *American Wilderness: A New History*.]

Shining Rock. The Big Horn Mountains. Cumberland Island. Gates of the Arctic. Mojave. [...] The names alone thrill. These are some of the 677 federally designated wilderness areas of the United States, the most carefully preserved landscapes in the nation. In many of these places, you can walk for days without seeing another person or any obvious signs of human artifice, should you choose to do so. Outside this federal national wilderness system, more wilderness is preserved in our national parks, our national forests, and the numerous other categories of federally managed land. Still more wilderness can be found in private property - from estates and hunting clubs to Nature Conservancy sites. In a world that is increasingly paved and groomed, such places are precious. And given the continued thirst of our consumerist society for resources, their existence is at first glance surprising. The nation that, arguably, most fully has embraced industrial capitalism and consumer culture, a nation whose wealth has been predicated on its ability to harvest and transform an unusually rich bounty of natural resources, simultaneously developed rationales and models for setting aside landscapes (often spectacular ones) as permanent wildlands. This book explores the apparently contradictory history of Americans and their wilderness.

Twenty-first-century Americans love wilderness. We idealize it, we romanticize it, we hike in it, we camp in it, we long to experience it. So many Americans want to enjoy wilderness that recreational specialists have devised 'low-impact' camping techniques so that thousands of U.S. citizens can visit the same mountain or the same forest and feel as if they are the first to set foot in it. We name our automobiles after mountain ranges and rugged Western landscapes. We advertise beer with wilderness - "The Taste of the Rockies," or "Come to the mountains, come: to Busch beer." We hang pictures of wilderness on our walls. People dress every day as if they were heading out on a wilderness hike, carrying backpacks instead of briefcases, wearing polar fleece and hiking boots. Our national park system is the oldest in the world, and every year millions of Americans make pilgrimages to these spectacular, even sacred, sites. The U.S. environmental organizations that focus upon the preservation of wilderness and wild species have combined memberships reaching into the millions.

Of course, to say that "Americans love wilderness" is far too simple. At times, it seems that we might love our wilderness to death. Automotive gridlock exists not just in our cities; national parks such as Yellowstone, the Smoky Mountains, and the Grand Canyon look like parking lots in the summer, with bumper-to-bumper traffic crawling along park roads and automotive exhaust clouding the sky. We show our love for our national parks by driving hundreds of miles to see them in RVs and SUVs that, at their best, travel fifteen miles per gallon of gas. Nowhere is our national schizophrenia more in evidence than in the ongoing debates over drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Many Americans want to preserve the wilderness characteristics of this landscape, but they also drive the very cars - GMC Yukons and Toyota Tundras being the most ironically named - that make new sources of Arctic oil appear to be necessary. [...] Contemporary U.S. society is the most environmentally destructive in the world, if measured by resource use, energy consumption, per capita trash production, and other pollution measures. The United States, with approximately 4 percent of the world's population, emits roughly 25% of the global production of carbon dioxide. [...] Insofar as the countries of the developing world adopt a U.S. style resource-intensive consumer culture, it bodes ill for the wilderness of the world.

So what does it mean to say that Americans love wilderness? Are we hypocrites? Our love for wilderness is tangibly visible on our national maps. The American national park system is perhaps our most globally accepted governmental idea, found (unlike democracy or the separation of powers) even

in the crudest dictatorships and single-party states. Yet national parks, with their tourist-oriented infrastructure of roads, visitor centers and lodges, were not wild enough for many Americans, and in 1965, the Wilderness Act was passed, establishing national wilderness areas. According to this law, "wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominant the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area which the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." [...]

Some historians have tried to explain these contradictions by analyzing wilderness politics - charting the growth of the wilderness movement over the years, the passage of legislation, and changing ideas about wilderness. [...] They often look to other cultural trends and forces, and they try to study the American love of wilderness as a manifestation of larger cultural patterns. Still others have focused upon histories of the landscapes themselves, showing how particular natural areas have changed. They have all shared, however, the conviction that the key to understanding contemporary American interactions with wilderness is by studying the past and how those attitudes arose and changed through time.

The historicizing of love can be profoundly disconcerting to one *in* love. [...] Who, after all, would want to be described as a person who buys wilderness areas part of a process of denial about her own environmentally destructive lifestyle, or as a person who supports wilderness bills for Alaska as a salve for his subconscious guilt over living in suburban sprawl? Not surprisingly, some wilderness advocates have come to think that wilderness history is irrelevant or even an impediment to their activism. As an example, when historians write about cultural constructions of wilderness- how wilderness is defined by the observer's culture - some activists are frustrated and reply that wilderness is a real thing, not an idea or a construction of culture.

Many an argument has begun because of lack of understanding of a simple truth: Wilderness is simultaneously a real thing and a human construction. Wilderness is difficult to define in part because it is a noun that "acts like an adjective," joining similar words, such as beauty or wisdom. But unlike those words, wilderness refers to a completely non-subjective, nonhuman, wild nature. Although different people perceive wilderness in different ways, it is inaccurate to argue that wilderness (like beauty) is purely in the eye of the beholder. Historians are trained to study culture rather than forest ecosystems (more properly the province of scientists), and thus even environmental history often focuses more upon reconstructing past human perceptions and ideas than on reconstructing ecosystems. It is a mistake to read into that focus the assumption that human perceptions create reality. [...] The ways of seeing the wilderness are different, but the wilderness itself - the forest that [one perceives and interprets] - does not change. [...]

Some historians have viewed the interaction between settlers and raw wilderness as the central reality of early American history. Francis Parkman, a historian at Harvard in the mid-1800s, wrote his most famous book about the Oregon Trail after walking a portion of the trail as research. Parkman saw the struggle of pioneers to settle the wilds of North America as the key story of his age, but he also mourned the end of the glorious, unsettled West (and was not at all flattering in his descriptions of the pioneers). [...] Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a paper, subsequently serialized in several books, entitled "The Frontier Thesis of American History." Turner argued that American civilization was in trouble because the 1890 census had declared the frontier to be closed (the continental United States had achieved a minimal population density in all territories). He proposed that the frontier had acted as a release valve for the pressures of urbanization and as a forge for the national character. With no more empty wild lands, America seemed destined for a long, slow, decline. Turner's reading of the crucial role of wilderness (as frontier) in U.S. history helped to provide a justification for political action to save wilderness in the decades that saw the beginning of the national forest system,

the expansion and formalization of the national park system, and the popularization of wilderness appreciation among the women and men of the United States.

In the 1960s, historians began to look more closely at the history of wilderness as an idea and the history of conservation efforts, as well as the earlier notion of wilderness as a forge for national character. Not coincidentally, the cultural context of that historical scholarship was the booming wilderness movement, highlighted by the 1964 passage of the national Wilderness Act. The incredible popularity of some of that historical scholarship - most particularly Roderick Nash's 1967 *Wilderness and the American Mind* - reflected not just the considerable quality of these writings, but also the degree to which Nash and his colleagues captured the environmental spirit of the age. [...]

Nash argued that early Americans were predisposed by European culture and their Judeo-Christian heritage to see wilderness as evil, dangerous, and ungodly. [...] As the forests of North America were cleared, however, and romanticism became the ascendant Western mode of thought, educated elites and urbanites began to attribute positive virtues to wilderness. Thus, wilderness appreciation originated among East Coast elites who were separated from wilderness by an industrializing civilization. By the 20th century, this elite movement had spread into a "wilderness cult," a widespread, and almost fanatical belief on the part of (still primarily middle-class and urban) Americans that wilderness would cure the problems of industrial society. [...]

In the decades since Nash's path-breaking book, dozens of historians followed in his footsteps and studied different aspects of the history of American wilderness ideas and politics. [...] By the 1990s, a growing number of historians argued that these findings called for a different interpretation of wilderness and its history. Among these wilderness revisionists, none has been more influential than William Cronon, particularly through his 1995 essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."

Cronon's essay argued that the traditional definition of wilderness (a pristine landscape untouched by human hands) was part of a persistent Western dualism juxtaposing wilderness and civilization, nature and human, as pure opposites. Ultimately, Cronon speculated this wilderness idea actually worked against the emergence of an environmental movement that could make industrial societies livable. By claiming that any human touch (or, less extreme, any sign of industrial civilization) degrades a landscape beyond being worth saving, there is no need to focus upon improving the local environments in which we all work (and whose degradation is so economically attractive). We can save distant pure landscapes and abuse those on which we live. This allows many Americans to be good wilderness-loving environmentalists while they continue to participate in environmentally destructive development at home. In this view, wilderness preservation is not a reaction against industrialization, but actually enables the process. Wilderness is the cultural sleight of hand that makes our (often grotesque) contemporary development and exploitation mentally acceptable. He concluded that Americans need to spend more time focused on wildness - the wildness that can be found in the middle landscape that blends the human and the natural - than on a pure wilderness that exists outside of history.

Cronon's essay (and the other essays in the book of which it was a part) helped to ignite a raging debate that quickly moved from the pages of academic journals to newspapers and popular periodicals. Was wilderness a problematic concept? Was it the "wrong nature," as Cronon's title implied? Cronon had acknowledged that his essay was, in places, speculative, and some of his ideas were so sweeping as to be ultimately impossible to prove or disprove. Unfortunately, many of the arguments resulting from the essay eschewed subtlety (as was true of the essay's title as well, though the essay itself was far more nuanced). Not all responses were polemical, however, and at its best the controversy encouraged a number of people to reconsider the relationship between wilderness and American culture. The best

arguments and essays [...] both the traditional and revisionist interpretations, are useful in understanding the past; any attempt to analyze the complexity of changing U.S. culture inevitably comes to realize that no one explanation is sufficient for any historical phenomenon. There is not just one monolithic American mind or way of seeing - or of loving - wilderness.

The new wilderness historians (those writing since 1990 and particularly those who began their work in the years immediately before and after the wilderness debates) share several characteristics. They are more attuned to power disparities and the politics of race, class, and gender than their 1960s predecessors. They are often concerned with U.S. over consumption, the dismal state of our cities and urban sprawl and America's role as the world's top polluter. [...]

The new wilderness historians tend to argue that their work reflects the natural maturation of any academic subfield [...] born of the concerns of a social movement. Over time, wilderness historians have deepened their analysis, discovered new sources and stories, and inevitably acquired a critical distance from the movement not initially possible in the first heady days of [...] the 1960s. [...]

The wilderness ideas and practices of the United States have been widely imitated around the globe and, in many cases, with striking historical parallels. Though crucial to U.S. identity and history, the wilderness idea, has never been just an American idea. Rather, it was derived from the shared human experience of modernity - the initially Euro-American, then global experiences of the scientific revolution, exploration, colonialism, industrialization, and the dramatic transformation of the natural world. From Parkman to the present, U.S. historians have been convinced that to understand American wilderness is to understand a crucial part of America. Perhaps they have undersold the importance of wilderness history; perhaps to understand wilderness is to understand part of the more global history of modernity and its discontents: our values, our hopes, our blind spots, and our fears, overlaid on a rapidly changing planet.

- **The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature, by William Cronon**

[Professor Cronon is the Frederick Jackson Turner and Vilas Research Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. He has been a Rhodes Scholar, Danforth Fellow, Guggenheim Fellow, and MacArthur Fellow; he has won prizes for his teaching at both Yale and Wisconsin; and in 2006 was elected a Fellow of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters as well as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.]

The time has come to rethink wilderness. This will seem a heretical claim to many environmentalists, since the idea of wilderness has for decades been a fundamental tenet - indeed, a passion of the environmental movement, especially in the United States. For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet. As Henry David Thoreau once famously declared, "In Wilderness is the preservation of the World."

But is it? The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation - indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular

moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem.

To assert the unnaturalness of so natural a place will no doubt seem absurd or even perverse to many readers, so let me hasten to add that the nonhuman world we encounter in wilderness is far from being merely our own invention. I celebrate with others who love wilderness the beauty and power of the things it contains. Each of us who has spent time there can conjure images and sensations that seem all the more hauntingly real for having engraved themselves so indelibly on our memories. Such memories may be uniquely our own, but they are also familiar enough to be instantly recognizable to others. Remember this? The torrents of mist shoot out from the base of a great waterfall in the depths of a Sierra canyon, the tiny droplets cooling your face as you listen to the roar of the water and gaze up toward the sky through a rainbow that hovers just out of reach. [...] And this: the moment beside the trail as you sit on a sandstone ledge, your boots damp with the morning dew while you take in the rich smell of the pines, and the small red fox — or maybe for you it was a raccoon or a coyote or a deer — that suddenly ambles across your path, stopping for a long moment to gaze in your direction with cautious indifference before continuing on its way. Remember the feelings of such moments, and you will know as well as I do that you were in the presence of something irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly Other than yourself. Wilderness is made of that too.

And yet, what brought each of us to the places where such memories became possible is entirely a cultural invention. Go back 250 years in American and European history, and you do not find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we would call "the wilderness experience." As late as the eighteenth century, the most common usage of the word "wilderness" in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be "deserted," "savage," "desolate," "barren" - in short, a "waste," the word's nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was "bewilderment" - or terror.

Many of the word's strongest associations then were biblical, for it is used over and over again in the King James Version to refer to places on the margins of civilization where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair. The wilderness was where Moses had wandered with his people for forty years, and where they had nearly abandoned their God to worship a golden idol. "For Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel," we read in Exodus, "They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in." The wilderness was where Christ had struggled with the devil and endured his temptations: "And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness for forty days tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered Unto him." The "delicious Paradise" of John Milton's Eden was surrounded by "a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides /Access denied" to all who sought entry. When Adam and Eve were driven from that garden, the world they entered was a wilderness that only their labor and pain could redeem. Wilderness, in short, was a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling. Whatever value it might have arose solely from the possibility that it might be "reclaimed"

and turned toward human ends - planted as a garden, say, or a city upon a hill. In its raw state, it had little or nothing to offer civilized men and women.

But by the end of the nineteenth century, all this had changed. The wastelands that had once seemed worthless had for some people come to seem almost beyond price. That Thoreau in 1862 could declare wildness to be the preservation of the world suggests the sea change that was going on. Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good - it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall - and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself. When John Muir arrived in the Sierra Nevada in 1869, he would declare, "No description of Heaven that I have ever heard or read of seems half so fine." He was hardly alone in expressing such emotions. One by one, various corners of the American map came to be designated as sites whose wild beauty was so spectacular that a growing number of citizens had to visit and see them for themselves. Niagara Falls was the first to undergo this transformation, but it was soon followed by the Catskills, the Adirondacks, Yosemite, Yellowstone, and others. Yosemite was deeded by the U. S. government to the state of California in 1864 as the nation's first wildland park, and Yellowstone became the first true national park in 1872.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, in the single most famous episode in American conservation history, a national debate had exploded over whether the city of San Francisco should be permitted to augment its water supply by damming the Tuolumne River in Hetch Hetchy valley, well within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park. The dam was eventually built, but what today seems no less significant is that so many people fought to prevent its completion. Even as the fight was being lost, Hetch Hetchy became the battle cry of an emerging movement to preserve wilderness. Fifty years earlier, such opposition would have been unthinkable. Few would have questioned the merits of "reclaiming" a wasteland like this in order to put it to human use. Now the defenders of Hetch Hetchy attracted widespread national attention by portraying such an act not as improvement or progress but as desecration and vandalism. Lest one doubt that the old biblical metaphors had been turned completely on their heads, listen to John Muir attack the dam's defenders. "Their arguments," he wrote, "are curiously like those of the devil, devised for the destruction of the first garden so much of the very best Eden fruit going to waste; so much of the best Tuolumne water and Tuolumne scenery going to waste." For Muir and the growing number of Americans who shared his views, Satan's home had become God's own temple.

The sources of this rather astonishing transformation were many, but for the purposes of this essay they can be gathered under two broad headings: the sublime and the frontier. Of the two, the sublime is the older and more pervasive cultural construct, being one of the most important expressions of that broad transatlantic movement we today label as romanticism; the frontier is more peculiarly American, though it too had its European antecedents and parallels. The two converged to remake wilderness in their own image, freighting it with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology, which is why it is no accident that so much environmentalist discourse takes its bearings from the wilderness these intellectual movements helped create. Although wilderness may today seem to be just one environmental concern among many, it in fact serves as the foundation for a long list of other such concerns that on their face seem quite remote from it. That is why its influence is so pervasive and, potentially, so insidious.

To gain such remarkable influence, the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred. This

possibility had been present in wilderness even in the days when it had been a place of spiritual danger and moral temptation. If Satan was there, then so was Christ, who had found angels as well as wild beasts during His sojourn in the desert. In the wilderness the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, had always seemed less certain than elsewhere. This was why the early Christian saints and mystics had often emulated Christ's desert retreat as they sought to experience for themselves the visions and spiritual testing He had endured. One might meet devils and run the risk of losing one's soul in such a place, but one might also meet God. For some that possibility was worth almost any price.

By the eighteenth century this sense of the wilderness as a landscape where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface was expressed in the doctrine of the *sublime*, a word whose modern usage has been so watered down by commercial hype and tourist advertising that it retains only a dim echo of its former power. In the theories of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, William Gilpin, and others, sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God. Romantics had a clear notion of where one could be most sure of having this experience. Although God might, of course, choose to show Himself anywhere, He would most often be found in those vast, powerful landscapes where one could not help feeling insignificant and being reminded of one's own mortality. Where were these sublime places? The eighteenth-century catalog of their locations feels very familiar, for we still see and value landscapes as it taught us to do. God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset. One has only to think of the sites that Americans chose for their first national parks - Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Rainier, Zion - to realize that virtually all of them fit one or more of these categories. Less sublime landscapes simply did not appear worthy of such protection; not until the 1940s, for instance, would the first swamp be honored, in Everglades National Park, and to this day there is no national park in the grasslands. [...]

But even as it came to embody the awesome power of the sublime, wilderness was also being tamed - not just by those who were building settlements in its midst but also by those who most celebrated its inhuman beauty. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the terrible awe that Wordsworth and Thoreau regarded as the appropriately pious stance to adopt in the presence of their mountaintop God was giving way to a much more comfortable, almost sentimental demeanor. As more and more tourists sought out the wilderness as a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty, the sublime in effect became domesticated. The wilderness was still sacred, but the religious sentiments it evoked were more those of a pleasant parish church than those of a grand cathedral or a harsh desert retreat. The writer who best captures this late romantic sense of a domesticated sublime is undoubtedly John Muir, whose descriptions of Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada reflect none of the anxiety or terror one finds in earlier writers. [...] The sublime wilderness had ceased to be a place of satanic temptation and become instead a sacred temple, much as it continues to be for those who love it today.

But the romantic sublime was not the only cultural movement that helped transform wilderness into a sacred American icon during the nineteenth century. No less important was the powerful romantic attraction of primitivism, dating back at least to Rousseau — the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living. In the United States, this was embodied most strikingly in the national myth of the frontier. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1893 the classic academic statement of this myth, but it had been part of American cultural traditions for well over a century. As Turner described the process, easterners and European immigrants, in moving to the wild unsettled lands of the frontier, shed the

trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby reinfused themselves with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character. Seen in this way, wild country became a place not just of religious redemption but of national renewal, the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be an American.

One of Turner's most provocative claims was that by the 1890s the frontier was passing away. Never again would "such gifts of free land offer themselves" to the American people. "The frontier has gone," he declared, "and with its going has closed the first period of American history." Built into the frontier myth from its very beginning was the notion that this crucible of American identity was temporary and would pass away. Those who have celebrated the frontier have almost always looked backward as they did so, mourning an older, simpler, truer world that is about to disappear forever. That world and all of its attractions, Turner said, depended on free land—on wilderness. Thus, in the myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past - and as an insurance policy to protect its future. It is no accident that the movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas began to gain real momentum at precisely the time that laments about the passing frontier reached their peak. To protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin.

Among the core elements of the frontier myth was the powerful sense among certain groups of Americans that wilderness was the last bastion of rugged individualism. Turner tended to stress communitarian themes when writing frontier history, asserting that Americans in primitive conditions had been forced to band together with their neighbors to form communities and democratic institutions. For other writers, however, frontier democracy for communities was less compelling than frontier freedom for individuals. By fleeing to the outer margins of settled land and society - so the story ran - an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life. The mood among writers who celebrated frontier individualism was almost always nostalgic; they lamented not just a lost way of life but the passing of the heroic men who had embodied that life. Thus Owen Wister in the introduction to his classic 1902 novel *The Virginian* could write of "a vanished world" in which "the horseman, the cow-puncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil" rode only "in his historic yesterday" and would "never come again." [...]

The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity. Wister's contemptuous remarks about Wall Street and Newport suggest what he and many others of his generation believed—that the comforts and seductions of civilized life were especially insidious for men, who all too easily became emasculated by the femininizing tendencies of civilization. More often than not, men who felt this way came, like Wister and Roosevelt, from elite class backgrounds. The curious result was that frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of anti-modernism. The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects. If the frontier was passing, then men who had the means to do so should preserve for themselves some remnant of its wild landscape so that they might enjoy the regeneration and renewal that came from sleeping under the stars, participating in blood sports, and living off the land. The frontier might be gone, but the frontier experience could still be had if only wilderness were preserved.

[... The] wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth, standing for the wild freedom of America's past and seeming to represent a highly attractive natural alternative to the ugly artificiality of modern civilization. The irony, of course, was that in the process wilderness came to reflect the very civilization its devotees sought to escape. Ever since the nineteenth century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks. Country people generally know far too much about working the land to regard *un*-worked land as their ideal. In contrast, elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen projected their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created wilderness in their own image.

There were other ironies as well. The movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas followed hard on the heels of the final Indian wars, in which the prior human inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved onto reservations. The myth of the wilderness as "virgin," uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation. Among the things that most marked the new national parks as reflecting a post-frontier consciousness was the relative absence of human violence within their boundaries. The actual frontier had often been a place of conflict, in which invaders and invaded fought for control of land and resources. Once set aside within the fixed and carefully policed boundaries of the modern bureaucratic state, the wilderness lost its savage image and became safe: a place more of reverie than of revulsion or fear. Meanwhile, its original inhabitants were kept out by dint of force, their earlier uses of the land redefined as inappropriate or even illegal. To this day, for instance, the Blackfeet continue to be accused of "poaching" on the lands of Glacier National Park that originally belonged to them and that were ceded by treaty only with the proviso that they be permitted to hunt there.

The removal of Indians to create an "uninhabited wilderness" - uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place - reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is. To return to my opening argument: there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. Indeed, one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. Seen as the frontier, it is a savage world at the dawn of civilization, whose transformation represents the very beginning of the national historical epic. Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is the place of youth and childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory. Seen as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time's arrow. No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us.

This escape from history is one reason why the language we use to talk about wilderness is often permeated with spiritual and religious values that reflect human ideals far more than the material world of physical nature. Wilderness fulfills the old romantic project of secularizing Judeo-Christian values so as to make a new cathedral not in some petty human building but in God's own creation, Nature itself. Many environmentalists who reject traditional notions of the Godhead and who regard themselves as agnostics or even atheists nonetheless express feelings tantamount to religious awe when in the presence of wilderness—a fact that testifies to the success of the romantic project. [...].

Thus it is that wilderness serves as the unexamined foundation on which so many of the quasi-religious values of modern environmentalism rest. The critique of modernity that is one of environmentalism's most important contributions to the moral and political discourse of our time more often than not appeals, explicitly or implicitly, to wilderness as the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world. Wilderness is the natural, un-fallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are—or ought to be.

But the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. The dream of an un-worked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living - urban folk for whom food comes from a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field, and for whom the wooden houses in which they live and work apparently have no meaningful connection to the forests in which trees grow and die. Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.

This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. If this is so - if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral - then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, *honorable* human place in nature might actually look like.

Worse: to the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our *real* home is in the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. We inhabit civilization while holding some part of ourselves - what we imagine to be the most precious part — aloof from its entanglements. We work our nine-to-five jobs in its institutions, we eat its food, we drive its cars (not least to reach the wilderness), we benefit from the intricate and all too invisible networks with which it shelters us, all the while pretending that these things are not an essential part of who we are. By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. In its flight from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature - in all of these ways, wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century.

By now I hope it is clear that my criticism in this essay is not directed at wild nature per se, or even at efforts to set aside large tracts of wild land, but rather at the specific habits of thinking that flow from this complex cultural construction called wilderness. It is not the things we label as wilderness that

are the problem - for nonhuman nature and large tracts of the natural world *do* deserve protection - but rather what we ourselves mean when we use that label. Lest one doubt how pervasive these habits of thought actually are in contemporary environmentalism, let me list some of the places where wilderness serves as the ideological underpinning for environmental concerns that might otherwise seem quite remote from it. Defenders of biological diversity, for instance, although sometimes appealing to more utilitarian concerns, often point to “untouched” ecosystems as the best and richest repositories of the undiscovered species we must certainly try to protect. Although at first blush an apparently more “scientific” concept than wilderness, biological diversity in fact invokes many of the same sacred values, which is why organizations like the Nature Conservancy have been so quick to employ it as an alternative to the seemingly fuzzier and more problematic concept of wilderness. There is a paradox here, of course. To the extent that biological diversity (indeed, even wilderness itself) is likely to survive in the future only by the most vigilant and self-conscious management of the ecosystems that sustain it, the ideology of wilderness is potentially in direct conflict with the very thing it encourages us to protect.

The most striking instances of this have revolved around “endangered species,” which serve as vulnerable symbols of biological diversity while at the same time standing as surrogates for wilderness itself. The terms of the Endangered Species Act in the United States have often meant that those hoping to defend pristine wilderness have had to rely on a single endangered species like the spotted owl to gain legal standing for their case - thereby making the full power of sacred land inhere in a single numinous organism whose habitat then becomes the object of intense debate about appropriate management and use. The ease with which anti-environmental forces like the wise-use movement have attacked such single-species preservation efforts suggests the vulnerability of strategies like these.

[...] Those who seek to preserve such “wilderness” from the activities of native peoples run the risk of reproducing the same tragedy - being forcibly [sic] removed from an ancient home - that befell American Indians. Third World countries face massive environmental problems and deep social conflicts, but these are not likely to be solved by a cultural myth that encourages us to “preserve” peopleless landscapes that have not existed in such places for millennia. At its worst, as environmentalists are beginning to realize, exporting American notions of wilderness in this way can become an unthinking and self-defeating form of cultural imperialism.

[... E]verything we know about environmental history suggests that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing. [...] The point is not that our current problems are trivial, or that our devastating effects on the earth’s ecosystems should be accepted as inevitable or “natural.” It is rather that we seem unlikely to make much progress in solving these problems if we hold up to ourselves as the mirror of nature a wilderness we ourselves cannot inhabit.

To do so is merely to take to a logical extreme the paradox that was built into wilderness from the beginning: if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves. The absurdity of this proposition flows from the underlying dualism it expresses. Not only does it ascribe greater power to humanity than we in fact possess — physical and biological nature will surely survive in some form or another long after we ourselves have gone the way of all flesh - but in the end it offers us little more than a self-defeating counsel of despair. The tautology gives us no way out: if wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the sole solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide. It is not a proposition that seems likely to produce very positive or practical results.

[...] Earth First! founder Dave Foreman [...] reproduces an extreme but still easily recognizable version of the myth of frontier primitivism. When he writes of his fellow Earth Firsters that “we believe we must return to being animal, to glorying in our sweat, hormones, tears, and blood” and that “we struggle against the modern compulsion to become dull, passionless androids,” he is following in the footsteps of Owen Wister. Although his arguments give primacy to defending biodiversity and the autonomy of wild nature, his prose becomes most passionate when he speaks of preserving “the wilderness experience.” His own ideal “Big Outside” bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the frontier myth: wide open spaces and virgin land with no trails, no signs, no facilities, no maps, no guides, no rescues, no modern equipment. Tellingly, it is a land where hardy travelers can support themselves by hunting with “primitive weapons (bow and arrow, atlatl, knife, sharp rock).” [...]

However much one may be attracted to such a vision, it entails problematic consequences. For one, it makes wilderness the locus for an epic struggle between malign civilization and benign nature, compared with which all other social, political, and moral concerns seem trivial. Foreman writes, “The preservation of wildness and native diversity is *the* most important issue. Issues directly affecting only humans pale in comparison.” Presumably, so do any environmental problems whose victims are mainly people, for such problems usually surface in landscapes that have already “fallen” and are no longer wild. This would seem to exclude from the radical environmentalist agenda problems of occupational health and safety in industrial settings, problems of toxic waste exposure on “unnatural” urban and agricultural sites, problems of poor children poisoned by lead exposure in the inner city, problems of famine and poverty and human suffering in the “overpopulated” places of the earth—problems, in short, of environmental justice. If we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or their fate.

It is no accident that these supposedly inconsequential environmental problems affect mainly poor people, for the long affiliation between wilderness and wealth means that the only poor people who count when wilderness is *the* issue are hunter-gatherers, who presumably do not consider themselves to be poor in the first place. The dualism at the heart of wilderness encourages its advocates to conceive of its protection as a crude conflict between the “human” and the “nonhuman” - or, more often, between those who value the nonhuman and those who do not. This in turn tempts one to ignore crucial differences *among* humans and the complex cultural and historical reasons why different peoples may feel very differently about the meaning of wilderness.

Why, for instance, is the “wilderness experience” so often conceived as a form of recreation best enjoyed by those whose class privileges give them the time and resources to leave their jobs behind and “get away from it all”? Why does the protection of wilderness so often seem to pit urban recreationists against rural people who actually earn their living from the land (excepting those who sell goods and services to the tourists themselves)? Why in the debates about pristine natural areas are “primitive” peoples idealized, even sentimentalized, until the moment they do something unprimitive, modern, and unnatural, and thereby fall from environmental grace? What are the consequences of a wilderness ideology that devalues productive labor and the very concrete knowledge that comes from working the land with one’s own hands? All of these questions imply conflicts among different groups of people, conflicts that are obscured behind the deceptive clarity of “human” vs. “nonhuman.” If in answering these knotty questions we resort to so simplistic an opposition, we are almost certain to ignore the very subtleties and complexities we need to understand.

But the most troubling cultural baggage that accompanies the celebration of wilderness has less

to do with remote rain forests. [...] Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home. Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it. The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as *ab-use*, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship. My own belief is that only by exploring this middle ground will we learn ways of imagining a better world for all of us: humans and nonhumans, rich people and poor, women and men, First Worlders and Third Worlders, white folks and people of color, consumers and producers - a world better for humanity in all of its diversity and for all the rest of nature too. The middle ground is where we actually live. It is where we—all of us, in our different places and ways make our homes.

That is why, when I think of the times I myself have come closest to experiencing what I might call the sacred in nature, I often find myself remembering wild places much closer to home. I think, for instance, of a small pond near my house where water bubbles up from limestone springs to feed a series of pools that rarely freeze in winter and so play home to waterfowl that stay here for the protective warmth even on the coldest of winter days, gliding silently through steaming mists as the snow falls from gray February skies. I think of a November evening long ago when I found myself on a Wisconsin hilltop in rain and dense fog, only to have the setting sun break through the clouds to cast an otherworldly golden light on the misty farms and woodlands below, a scene so unexpected and joyous that I lingered past dusk so as not to miss any part of the gift that had come my way. And I think perhaps most especially of the blown-out, bankrupt farm in the sand country of central Wisconsin where Aldo Leopold and his family tried one of the first American experiments in ecological restoration, turning ravaged and infertile soil into carefully tended ground where the human and the nonhuman could exist side by side in relative harmony. What I celebrate about such places is not *just* their wildness, though that certainly is among their most important qualities; what I celebrate even more is that they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it.

Indeed, my principal objection to wilderness is that it may teach us to be dismissive or even contemptuous of such humble places and experiences. Without our quite realizing it, wilderness tends to privilege some parts of nature at the expense of others. Most of us, I suspect, still follow the conventions of the romantic sublime in finding the mountaintop more glorious than the plains, the ancient forest nobler than the grasslands, the mighty canyon more inspiring than the humble marsh. Even John Muir, in arguing against those who sought to dam his beloved Hetch Hetchy valley in the Sierra Nevada, argued for alternative dam sites in the gentler valleys of the foothills - a preference that had nothing to do with nature and everything with the cultural traditions of the sublime. Just as problematically, our frontier traditions have encouraged Americans to define “true” wilderness as requiring very large tracts of roadless land - what Dave Foreman calls “The Big Outside.” Leaving aside the legitimate empirical question in conservation biology of how large a tract of land must be before a given species can reproduce on it, the emphasis on big wilderness reflects a romantic frontier belief that one hasn’t really gotten away from civilization unless one can go for days at a time without encountering another human being. By teaching us to fetishize sublime places and wide open country, these peculiarly American ways of thinking about wilderness encourage us to adopt too high a standard for what counts as “natural.” If it isn’t hundreds of square miles big, if it doesn’t give us God’s-eye views or grand vistas, if it doesn’t permit us the illusion that we are alone on the planet, then it really isn’t natural. It’s too small, too plain, or too crowded to be *authentically* wild.

In critiquing wilderness as I have done in this essay, I’m forced to confront my own deep

ambivalence about its meaning for modern environmentalism. On the one hand, one of my own most important environmental ethics is that people should always be conscious that they are part of the natural world, inextricably tied to the ecological systems that sustain their lives. Any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature - as wilderness tends to do - is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior. On the other hand, I also think it no less crucial for us to recognize and honor nonhuman nature as a world we did not create, a world with its own independent, nonhuman reasons for being as it is. The autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to me an indispensable corrective to human arrogance. Any way of looking at nature that helps us remember—as wilderness also tends to do—that the interests of people are not necessarily identical to those of every other creature or of the earth itself is likely to foster *responsible* behavior. To the extent that wilderness has served as an important vehicle for articulating deep moral values regarding our obligations and responsibilities to the nonhuman world, I would not want to jettison the contributions it has made to our culture's ways of thinking about nature.

If the core problem of wilderness is that it distances us too much from the very things it teaches us to value, then the question we must ask is what it can tell us about *home*, the place where we actually live. How can we take the positive values we associate with wilderness and bring them closer to home? I think the answer to this question will come by broadening our sense of the otherness that wilderness seeks to define and protect. In reminding us of the world we did not make, wilderness can teach profound feelings of humility and respect as we confront our fellow beings and the earth itself. Feelings like these argue for the importance of self-awareness and self-criticism as we exercise our own ability to transform the world around us, helping us set responsible limits to human mastery - which without such limits too easily becomes human hubris. Wilderness is the place where, symbolically at least, we try to withhold our power to dominate. [...]

Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit. Nothing could be more misleading. The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw - even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships. The tree in the garden could easily have sprung from the same seed as the tree in the forest, and we can claim only its location and perhaps its form as our own. Both trees stand apart from us; both share our common world. The special power of the tree in the wilderness is to remind us of this fact. It can teach us to recognize the wildness we did not see in the tree we planted in our own backyard. By seeing the otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which at first seemed merely ordinary. If wilderness can do this—if it can help us perceive and respect a nature we had forgotten to recognize as natural—then it will become part of the solution to our environmental dilemmas rather than part of the problem.

This will only happen, however, if we abandon the dualism that sees the tree in the garden as artificial - completely fallen and unnatural - and the tree in the wilderness as natural - completely pristine and wild. Both trees in some ultimate sense are wild; both in a practical sense now depend on our management and care. We are responsible for both, even though we can claim credit for neither. Our challenge is to stop thinking of such things according to a set of bipolar moral scales in which the human and the non-human, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and the unfallen, serve as our conceptual map for understanding and valuing the world. Instead, we need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating

the others. We need to honor the Other within and the Other next door as much as we do the exotic Other that lives far away - a lesson that applies as much to people as it does to (other) natural things. In particular, we need to discover a common middle ground in which all of these things, from the city to the wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word "home." Home, after all, is the place where finally we make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children.

The task of making a home in nature is what Wendell Berry has called "the forever unfinished lifework of our species." "The only thing we have to preserve nature with," he writes, "is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity." Calling a place home inevitably means that we will *use* the nature we find in it, for there can be no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home. But if we acknowledge the autonomy and otherness of the things and creatures around us - an autonomy our culture has taught us to label with the word "wild" — then we will at least think carefully about the uses to which we put them, and even ask if we should use them at all. Just so can we still join Thoreau in declaring that "in Wildness is the preservation of the World," for *wildness* (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere: in the seemingly tame fields and woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies. As Gary Snyder has wisely said, "A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one's own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be." To think ourselves capable of causing "the end of nature" is an act of great hubris, for it means forgetting the wildness that dwells everywhere within and around us.

Learning to honor the wild- learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other- means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions. It means that deep reflection and respect must accompany each act of use, and means too that we must always consider the possibility of non-use. It means looking at the part of nature we intend to turn toward our own ends and asking whether we can use it again and again and again sustainably - without its being diminished in the process. It means never imagining that we can flee into a mythical wilderness to escape history and the obligation to take responsibility for our own actions that history inescapably entails. Most of all, it means practicing remembrance and gratitude for thanksgiving is the simplest and most basic of ways for us to recollect the nature, the culture, and the history that have come together to make the world as we know it. If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world - not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both.

- **Fabricating Nature: A Critique of the Social Construction of Nature, by David W. Kidner**

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Scientific understandings of nature, including ecological understandings, have often been accused of being mechanistic; and in the last two decades, as dissatisfaction with positivism has grown, many theorists have moved toward recognition of the roles of culture and language in our perception and understanding of nature. [...] Among some social scientists, however, this emphasis on cultural

factors has replaced rather than complemented biological explanation, in a swing of the epistemological pendulum from the biologism of the 1950s to an equally uncontested preoccupation with culture; and the ripples of this linguistic and cultural preoccupation are spreading into environmental writing on both sides of the Atlantic. [...]

Claims that nature is entirely “socially constructed” have become widespread in recent years. Thus, Vivien Burr suggests that “what we regard as truth ... is a product not of objective observation of the world, but of ... social processes and interactions.” Similarly, Peter Mason argues that “reality” itself is a product of the activity of our imagination.” Language is often seen as playing a leading role in this construction: thus, William Chaloupka and R. McGreggor Cawley suggest that “nature, like everything else we talk about, is first and foremost an artifact of language.” In these terms, language is seen not as *representing* nature more or less adequately, but rather as *constituting* it, so that “any attempt to invoke the name of nature ... must now be either naive or ironic.” Similarly, constructionists “question the assumption that science is about nature as it exists outside us.” Rather, “scientific paradigms are socio-historical constructs - not given by the character of nature, but created out of social experience, cultural values, and political-economic structures.” Nature, according to this view, has no inherent structures or patterns of its own - a notion often criticized by constructionists as “essentialism”- but is structured *discursively*. The “dubious” logic of nature, as Chaloupka and Cawley argue, must therefore be replaced by “rhetoric.”

Such claims suggest that nature is an entity very different from that which many environmental theorists, writers, and activists have up until now believed. Rather than being viewed as a multifaceted, diverse order whose patterns and possibilities extend well beyond our ability to understand them, nature becomes an offshoot of a *social* reality which also constructs individuality. And since the social world varies according to time and place, then it follows that each of these social worlds will construct a somewhat different version of nature, and there is, therefore, no single “nature,” but rather a diversity of “natures” constituted by our various fantasies and languages. In William Cronon’s words, it “hardly needs saying that nothing in physical nature can help us adjudicate among these different visions [of nature], for in all cases nature merely serves as the mirror onto which societies project the ideal reflections they wish to see.” Constructionism therefore implies a relativistic stance within which one attitude toward or interpretation of the natural world is no better or worse than any other.

The implications of redefining nature thus are considerable. Cronon, for example, argues that wilderness ... is not a primitive sanctuary where the last remnants of an, untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature, can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural.

According to views such as these, then, nature is not the ground out of which human life grows, but “the site for a repertoire of definitional and contestatory activities.” In other words, nature is part of a *discursive* world, and any “problems” which might exist within this world are produced and solved by debate rather than by embodied action. In this spirit, John Hannigan argues that environmental problems originate in the discursive realm we call “science.” Criticizing the view that science can, at least to some extent, “reflect the physical reality of the natural world,” he claims that scientific knowledge “is highly dependent on a process of claims making.”

It is rare indeed to find an environmental problem which doesn’t have its origins in a body of scientific research. Acid rain, loss of biodiversity, global warming, ozone depletion, desertification and dioxin poisoning are all examples of problems which first began with a set of scientific observations.

Cronon echoes this sentiment, claiming that “some of the most dramatic environmental problems we appear to be facing ... exist mainly as simulated representations in complex computer models of natural systems.” Environmental problems, according to this viewpoint, are not disruptions of the ecological fabric of the world which can be more or less imperfectly detected, assessed and described through the scientific and conceptual tools available to us. They are, rather, *constructed* by these tools, and cannot be said to exist independently of the ways we measure and discuss them.

The difficulties and uncertainties surrounding assessments of ecological health are often used to justify these views. Thus, Hannigan suggests that because “so little is actually known about how species interact in ecosystems,” and because “key concepts” such as “nature, ecology, and environmentalism” are “by no means fixed in meaning but instead are both socially constructed and contested,” then “rather than a fixed entity, the environment is a fluid concept which is both culturally grounded and socially constituted.” The variety of human interpretations of nature, then, rather than being taken as suggesting that the complexity and diversity of the natural world exceeds our capacity to understand it, indicates to constructionists that there is no world ‘out there’ independent of human cognition and language. There is, therefore, a clear conflict between the social constructionist viewpoint and a more realist one which holds that although the natural world allows us to interpret it in various ways, the existence of this world is nevertheless largely independent of human social life.

Problems with Constructionism

[...] Few environmental writers would quarrel with the notion that our understandings of nature are affected by our cultural background, training, language, and so on, or that unmediated contact with nature is unrealistic. By analogy, most of us would accept that the way we see an animal will be affected by the type of binoculars we use. However, we might be more reluctant to accept that the animal is *constructed* by the act of looking through the binoculars, or that it has no independent existence aside from this act—claims that embody what Roy Bhaskar has referred to as the “epistemic fallacy,” or the view that “statements about being can be reduced to or analyzed in terms of statements about knowledge.” Environmental writing influenced by constructionism frequently confuses these two quite different types of statement. For example, Philippe Descola begins a recent paper by stating that “many anthropologists and historians now agree that conceptions of nature are socially constructed”—a statement with which few environmental writers of whatever persuasion would disagree; but two pages later, this statement has mutated into the much more debatable assertion that “nature is socially constructed.” As Andrew Collier ruefully notes, “the kind of idealism which treats the world as dependent on our cognitive choices ... has really come into its own” in recent decades.

Perhaps sensing their untenability, however, social constructionists frequently retreat from these extreme claims toward a reassuringly “commonsense” view. For example, Ulrich Beck’s influential *Risk Society* vacillates between the claim that environmental problems are social constructions which have no reality independent of our understanding of them, and the quite different view that objectively measurable environmental problems are making living increasingly risky. John Hannigan also has his epistemological cake and eats it, claiming that “environmental problems and solutions are end products of a dynamic social process of definition, negotiation and legitimation” whilst also cautioning us on the same page not to “deny the seriousness of the threats faced by our planet.” [...]

This sort of vacillation reflects the tension between a detached academic stance which has already abandoned any felt commitment to or involvement in the natural world, and the intuited or directly experienced loss of the wild and the natural which, although we are often unable to articulate it, we deeply sense in nonintellectual ways. Environmental destruction is not just a matter of how we describe, model, and conceptualize the world; it is also a matter of empirical experience, as when I revisit the areas in Surrey where I used to roam as a child forty years ago, now transformed from woods

and heathland to factories and housing estates. Given the extent of industrialism's transformation of the natural landscape into sites for agriculture and industrial production, and the evolution of a social world which is consistent with this transformation, to identify closely with the natural order is indeed, as Aldo Leopold put it, "to walk alone in a world of wounds." There are, therefore, powerful social and emotional reasons for resigning oneself to the loss of the natural world and withdrawing into a substitute fantasy world constructed with the aid of the electronic media. [...] Capitalism offers powerful incentives for us to make this type of substitution, and the proliferation of nature documentaries on television and the growth of manicured "natural environments" such as Sea World can be seen as part of an ongoing project to replace wild nature by manufactured substitutes. [...]

To constructionists, however, reality is a product of social life rather than empirical assessment, and the entities and forms which science identifies are "constituted through the artful creativity of scientists." However, as Rolston argues:

The sporophyte generation of mosses is haploid. Malaria is carried by *Plasmodium* in mosquitoes. Neither of those facts is likely to change with a new cultural filter. Golgi apparatus and mitochondria are here to stay. There is no feasible theory by which life on earth is not carbon-based and energized by photosynthesis, nor by which water is not composed of hydrogen and oxygen, whose properties depend on its being a polar molecule.

Science, then, may be a partial understanding which we often fatefully misconstrue as being a *complete* description of nature, but it is nevertheless firmly anchored in realities which are beyond the influence of language. To an increasing extent, however, even these realities are being modified by industrialism, not only through the breeding of certain species and the elimination of others, but also, and increasingly directly, through genetic manipulation. If nature, then, was not originally *constructed* by technology and language, it is in many ways in the process of being *reconstructed* by these means; and the metaphor "construction" assumes the absence or obliteration of natural structure, so that the world is simply made up of (verbal or physical) "raw materials." [...] Social constructionism, then, can be seen as rooted within a broader reconstructive project which reconfigures both humanity and the nonhuman world according to an industrialist blueprint. The physical and ideological replacement of nature, understood as the larger order out of which we grow, by a reduced order based on industrialist rationality finds its academic counterpart in the doctrine that nature is a mere part-actor in the wider drama of human life and language. [...]

Contextualizing Constructionism

A historical perspective allows us to step outside this industrialist reality and contextualize constructionism itself. If we consider cultural change in the Western world since the Renaissance, then a recurring theme has been the attempt to develop a "human" realm in contradistinction to "nature." Western philosophy and industrialist practice have driven this enterprise through their increasing tendency to separate thought and materiality; and some contemporary writers such as Fredric Jameson see postmodernism, which is part of the underlying intellectual milieu out of which constructionism has grown, as an extension of the same overall pattern. The assumption that the "human" realm is increasingly separate from "nature" is today part of our taken-for-granted understanding, and is a central tenet of science, economics, psychology, common sense, and almost every other facet of the global commercial system. [...] In this respect, constructionism is consistent with other forms of colonization. In a manner reminiscent of the way the New Zealand flatworm reduces its earthworm prey to a sort of amorphous jelly before ingesting it, so industrialism's colonization of the world operates by denying and dissolving any structure which is inconsistent with it, before using the resulting "raw materials" for its own ends. [...]

Just as the colonizers perceived 'empty' lands and 'cultureless' peoples, and industrialists perceive 'raw materials,' so to the constructionist "natural order is always an ordering constructed by people and used to make sense of nature, never an ordering insisted upon by nature itself and imposed upon people by it." Colonizing principles thus become "built into" epistemology, which henceforth contains its own intrinsic denial of natural structure.

It is probably no accident that language, the human ability which, more than any other differentiates us from the nonhuman inhabitants of the Earth, is often selected by constructionists as the defining basis of reality. This attempt to redefine reality in linguistic terms has many precursors in colonialist history: to take just one example, Columbus insisted on giving Spanish names to each area of the New World, knowing that they already had indigenous names; and he insisted, at one point, that his crew swear an oath alleging that their place of landing — the island which today we refer to as Cuba — was part of the continental mainland. [...] As this substitution of a manufactured, "human" reality for a natural reality proceeds, language appears not so much as a human attempt to communicate with and describe those forms which exist beyond language, but rather as itself *constituting* reality. Infected by this trend, environmentalists may fall into the trap of confusing terms such as *ecosystem* or *biodiversity* with the more complex and less visible realities which these terms point toward. Social constructionism can be understood as the inevitable culmination of this trend; and our forgetfulness that there exists an order "beyond the text" is epitomized by Baudrillard's claims that there is no "nature" out there, and that "our true environment is the universe of communication."

The intellectual dismemberment of reality is often a precursor to and a legitimization of its physical destruction, and academics as well as logging companies have contributed to the degradation of the natural world. Language is particularly central to this process, since it enables us to synthesize a "human" realm which is apparently independent of the nonhuman world. Thus, Michael Billig, defending a "rhetorical" approach to psychology, argues that "we must concentrate on the one power which separates humans from all those other organisms: the power of language." Discourse is therefore central to anthropocentrism; and it is hardly surprising that a discursively-defined world is one from which nature is effectively excluded.

This exclusion developed historically within Europe, and was spread throughout the globe through the process of colonization. [...] The language of the modern industrial era is therefore not designed to communicate with the world, but to exclude it, to reduce it to 'things and stuff' — a characteristic which makes the task of the environmental philosopher particularly difficult, since talking *about* nature becomes a way of not communicating *with* it, so implicitly reaffirming the separateness of the human realm.

Constructionism embodies a dubious 'solution' to the problems which stem from this dualistic dissociation of the 'human' and 'natural,' simply allowing one pole of the dualism to be assimilated by the other. Thus, for Cronon, if "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which human is entirely outside the natural" the answer, apparently, is to redefine wilderness as a "product of ... civilization." But this solution conflates two quite different meanings of *wilderness*: first, *wilderness* as a term encompassing the indefinitely large number of cultural interpretations of nature, and second, *wilderness* as the only partly knowable realm which such terms indirectly refer. [...]

From this point of view, language clumsily attempts to articulate realities which are beyond its powers to describe. Roderick Nash, for example, points out that the term *wilderness* "has a deceptive concreteness at first glance. The difficulty is that while the word is a noun it acts like an adjective. ... The term designates a quality (as the '*ness*' suggests) that produces a certain mood or feeling...." Thus, the term *wilderness* seduces us into thinking of it as a concrete 'thing' which can be 'saved,' rather like an old piece of furniture which we rescue from a rubbish tip — a mistake which intrinsically denies the wild,

the symbolic, the nonmaterial aspects of wilderness. As Gregory Bateson noted, “language depends on nouns, which seem to refer to things, while biological communication concerns pattern and relationship.” The view of language as constituting reality therefore places us within a world of things, while what Bateson referred to as “the pattern which connects” fades from awareness. [...] Just as industrialism devours indigenous, local adaptations, so the social sciences’ “paralysing ... obsession with language and communication” has the effect of assimilating wildness to the realm of human discourse; and an environmentalism which accepts the priority of language is therefore one within which wildness is already lost. [...]

Restoring the Dialectic between Nature and Culture

As Roy Bhaskar has made clear, it is entirely possible to maintain a conception of nature as external to us and as existing independently of thought and language whilst appreciating that the ways we sense and perceive nature are deeply affected by cultural and cognitive factors. Indeed, the awareness of the extent to which these cultural and cognitive factors keep us from knowing nature directly should induce in us a humility based on the recognition that nature must, for the most part, remain a mystery to us; and the notion of preserving nature, if it is of any use at all, must be rooted primarily in the willingness to let nature be rather than presuming to ‘save’ it through scientific knowledge or active management. While humans are part of nature and so have contributed in certain respects to the way it functions, this is a long way from saying that nature is ‘socially constructed’ or that it extends no further than the boundaries of our capacity to recognize or describe it.

[... The] intercourse between the human and the nonhuman natural can become a dance which defines both our separateness and our interdependence; and as part of this dance, a language which is aware of its own limits can “hold the vision together.” Such an understanding of language, reintegrated into the larger realm of the natural, can restore our membership within the natural world rather than colluding in our dissociation from it.